

While most Laurel residents were sleeping through the Feb. 11 snowstorm, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center technicians struggled in the dark to save an endangered species program.

But when morning broke and the storm tapered off, 18 inches of snow had damaged nearly all the flight-netted pens that secure the center's endangered whooping cranes.

"It's going to be very serious," said Research Manager John French with the whooping crane restoration program. "We expect to have a very poor breeding season this year."

Patuxent's crane breeding program plays a vital role in replenishing the birds' population in the United States, which hit an all-time low of 16 in the '40s. Patuxent is a founding member of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, a consortium of government and private groups working to establish a new migratory flock of whooping cranes nationwide.

The center has about 50 whoopers and over 120 sandhill cranes, which are used as surrogate parents for whooping crane chicks. The program usually produces 20 to 25 chicks every year, French said, but that number may be reduced significantly.

Adult whoopers are sensitive to disturbances at this time, and often will not lay eggs if moved out of their territories, crane technician Kathleen O'Malley said. Scientists usually limit human visitation in the colony to the crane caretakers by Feb. 1 each year, and the breeding season lasts through the summer, with eggs starting to be laid in late March.

Since the storm damaged 105 of the program's 110 flight-netted pens, the birds will not be back in the pens and able to begin their normal courting behavior for at least two more weeks.

"We've got to take down all that damaged netting and get rid of it," O'Malley said. "Then we have to fix the damaged pens, and then we have to put up new flight netting, and we have to do this as fast as possible."

French said the cost of repairing the damage was just under \$100,000, but the center has received manpower help from employees of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center and other agencies, as well as volunteers.

Maryland Sens. Paul Sarbanes (D) and Barbara Mikulski (D), along with U.S. Reps. Steny Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville and Benjamin Cardin (D-Dist. 3) of Baltimore, also have requested \$350,000 in emergency funding from the U.S. Department of the Interior for the refuge.

O'Malley said this was the worst snow damage she had experienced at the center in her 21 years of raising whooping crane chicks there.

By the time O'Malley arrived at 8 p.m., the center already had lost power.

None of the birds or technicians were injured, though several whooping and sandhill cranes escaped. Technicians captured all the whoopers by Feb. 13, but have recovered only two of nine runaway sandhill cranes. The remaining birds are lingering near the complex, O'Malley said. French said he expected they would be eventually recaptured.